The Rock

A Short Story by

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This story follows the narrative of the biblical "land of Moriah". Although the exact location of the events recorded here cannot be determined beyond doubt, this region must certainly be regarded as one of the most significant pieces of real estate in the world.

Cover illustration Lionel Hartley

The Rock

The afternoon sun burned down upon the old man as he trudged slowly up the hill leaning heavily on his staff as he went. Yet it was not the relentless sun, nor his age, which caused him to rely so much on the staff. Rather it was the immense burden crushing his soul that made each step harder than the one before. Above the hill a small dark cloud defied the otherwise clear blue sky. It was this cloud that had guided the old man since he arrived at the foothills, and to the hilltop directly beneath it he now laboriously repaired for he understood it to be the sign that he had been told he would receive.

A few paces behind the old man followed a youth, still just in his teens. His handsome features showed none of the pain in the heart of the old man. Indeed the carefree lad would have been much farther ahead had it not been for the load of wood he carried on his back. Yet there was a question in the lad's mind; there was something unusual about what they were doing. There were other times when they had gone together to worship their God, and to offer a sacrifice to Him, but this time it was different; something was missing. Finally, he found words to fit the question forming in his mind. "Father", he asked.

"Here I am my son?"

"Father, we have the fire, and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"[1]

Abraham's breaking heart lurched at the question. The dread moment had come. How could he tell his beloved son, the pride and joy of his life, the hope of all his dreams, what God had told him to do? Ever since God had spoken the terrible words to him, he had been able to think of nothing else. Could he have heard right? But the words kept repeating themselves in his mind until they became a nightmare, over and over again, relentlessly. *Abraham, take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on top of one of the mountains that I will show you.* Were these really the words of the stern, but loving, deity he had come to know so well? This is what the pagans did; sacrifice their children to their gods. But now God Himself was speaking. Ever since he had left his family in the Mesopotamia Valley, all those years ago, he had learned to recognise and obey the voice of his God. However much he wished it were not so, there was no doubt as to who had spoken those terrible words to him two mornings ago.

Yet what about the miraculous birth of this lad? The promise that in Abraham's old age he would have a son from whom would come a great nation? It made no sense. Truly God gives and God takes away. There must be an answer to this mystery. Perhaps God would raise Isaac from death?[2] Yes, that must be what was going to happen. But whatever God intended, Abraham had walked with Him long enough to know that when God commanded, His word must be obeyed. So he had arisen immediately, awoken the servants and told them to prepare for a long journey. They had known exactly what to do because he had often gone away like this before. Then, he had gently shaken Isaac awake, and, without even telling Sarah, his wife, for her maternal instincts would have led him to disobedience, they left their camp at Beersheba and headed north towards the dreaded land of Moriah.

Now the summit of the hill loomed close like a heartless executioner waiting for the order to carry out the sentence. Abraham could not bring himself to utter the words to his son. Not yet. Delay it a little longer. "My son", he said softly, "God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering".

Finally, after a steep climb up the side of one final valley, the summit was reached. From the top of the hill a scene of majestic grandeur spread out before them. To the West the hill dropped into a steep valley

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1 The story is found in *Genesis 22*.

2 *Hebrews 11:19*

that fell away to the south. Beyond, the land formed fertile valleys and graceful ridges running from north to south before it dropped away to the sea, hidden from view behind the ridges. To the east lay the plains of Mesopotamia, but they were obscured by another hill the other side of a valley also running from north to south. In times to come this hill would also be touched by God. To the South, and not more than half a mile away, the tented camp of an obviously wealthy landowner could be seen. But Abraham noticed none of this. Near the summit was a low flat rock, roughly circular in shape that formed a platform. Upon this rock Abraham would build his altar and realise the end of all his hopes for a son and heir.[3]

How does a man break news of this nature to the one he loves so much? How does a young man in the prime of life accept such a thing? Yet Isaac, the child of promise, had been raised by his aged parents to trust and obey the God of heaven. In his childlike faith he offered no resistance, for he had seen the hand of God do strange things before. Silently the sorrowing old man and the confused but innocent youth built an altar on the flat rock, and carefully laid out the wood on the altar. When there was no more work to be done, and any further delay was no more than procrastination, the two held one another in a long embrace. As Abraham clung to his child with breaking heart, he looked up to a seemingly unresponsive heaven and, in an agony of soul, presented his son to his God. Then, the last tearful farewells over, Isaac released himself from his father's embrace and climbed up onto the altar and lay on it as though preparing for a nap. His father bound his hands and feet, not for fear of Isaac's trying to escape, but because everything he did now delayed the moment when he had to do this unthinkable deed. But now the moment could be delayed no longer, and Abraham tremblingly, but deliberately, raised the knife toward heaven as he presented his offering to God. Then he lowered the knife and put it to his son's throat.

The last action was rapid, for the most difficult deeds are best done quickly. But the voice from heaven was also urgent, *Abraham. Abraham.*

"Here I am Lord."

Lay not your hand upon the lad. Don't hurt him. For now I know you fear God, for you would not withhold your son, your only son, from Me. Abraham dropped the knife as though it was something repulsive, and looked for the voice that spoke to him. Then he fell to his knees, his forehead touching the ground, and arms spread in front of him, for he knew that God was in the voice. Then, in the stillness of that intimate scene, the westerly breeze blowing off the great sea brought with it the faint, yet unmistakable sound of a lamb bleating in the distance. At first it was only Isaac whose sharp young ears could picked up the sound. But then Abraham heard it too and sent his son, released now from his cords of death, to go and bring the creature to him, for it was to become Isaac's substitute - the sacrifice must be made.

When Isaac found the ram it was caught in a thorn bush on the side of a hill some distance from the flat rock. The animal was caught by its horns, and the thorns had wrapped themselves around the suffering creature's head, and had caused blood to flow down its face, staining the white wool a dark crimson. The sensitive youth knelt by the frightened ram and tenderly removed the thorns from its bleeding head. After he had freed it he returned with it to his father who, with thanks to God, sacrificed it and offered it to Him as a burnt offering on the altar. God had provided Himself a lamb for the sacrifice, and Abraham gave the spot a fitting name, *Jehovah Jireh* - The Lord Will Provide.

Rather than immediately rejoining the servants, Abraham and Isaac turned due south and made for the tented camp they had seen from the Rock. Whilst the emotional trauma experienced by the old man may have led him to avoid social contact at this time, protocol demanded that he, a man of his wealth and status, not bypass the encampment of another so obviously of similar standing.

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3 The scriptures do not identify the exact spot on Mt. Moriah where Abraham offered Isaac.

The encampment was similar to Abraham's. People did not live in permanent structures then, but made large tents from animal skins. Family members and hired servants lived nearby, and, as the chief's wealth increased in the number of livestock he owned, so the population increased until quite a large community resulted.

Soon Abraham and Isaac found themselves being presented to the leader of the community. He, like Abraham, was a patriarch, and was called Melchizedek. Like Abraham, Melchizedek had migrated from the Mesopotamian Valley, and had settled in these fertile and peaceful valleys giving them the name *Salem*[4]. Little was known of his background as he had been there as long as anyone could remember.[5] Melchizedek, like Abraham, was a follower of the God of Noah, but the majority of Noah's descendants had fallen into a system of idolatrous sun worship established during the days of Nimrod, son of Ham. A faithful few, however, had resisted the influence of this religion, and had preferred to seek their livelihood among the pristine hills and valleys far from the corrupt cities of the plains. There, they sought a pure and simple form of worship following after the religion of Noah. It was such men as these as were Abraham and Melchizedek.

This was not the first time the two patriarchs had met. It was to Melchizedek that Abraham had given a tenth of his spoils of war when, years before he had defeated the enemies of Sodom[6]. Over the years, as Melchizedek had increased in wealth, his influence had spread, and by this time he was undisputed ruler of the region of Moriah. Regard for him had led the people in the region to accept him as their king. Yet in spite of his influence, Melchizedek was very much a man of peace. His devotion to the God of heaven, and his missionary activities among his idolatrous neighbours had led him to become a spiritual figurehead, a man to whom all came to present offerings and to request counsel. Thus he became known, not only as king, but also as priest; and it was to him that Abraham had presented the tithe of his increase.

4

The trial of Abraham was ended. Never again would any man be put to such a test. Over the years to come, God revealed to Abraham the secrets of the mystery of godliness[7]. Abraham came to understand the significance of the offering of Isaac, and the symbolism of the ram that was sacrificed in his place. He came to understand that the nation to come from his loins was not just a blood line, but also a great spiritual kingdom that would last for eternity under the godly rulership of a greater Child of Promise.

Years went by and the old patriarch passed to his rest. His son, Isaac, would come to the Rock from time to time, to offer sacrifices there and to meditate upon the promise. Then he would bring his own young sons, Jacob and Esau, and tell them the story of his deliverance from death. He would point out the hill on which he had rescued the bleeding ram, which his father had offered in his place. Then he would explain to them the great plan of salvation, how one day One would come who would die so that men might be forgiven and cleansed of their sinfulness.

But Isaac's sons became men and somehow the Rock was forgotten. Esau had other interests, and Jacob was forced to leave the land. In later years Jacob might have returned to it,[8] but a serious famine led him to Egypt where he eventually died. His descendants remained in Egypt until Moses led them back to the borders of the land of Promise four hundred years later. These four hundred years were to be a time of trial for the Hebrews, but also a test for the idolatrous and corrupt Amorites who inhabited the land promised to Abraham. For four hundred years they would have opportunity to change their

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4 *Genesis 14:18* Salem means *peace.*

5 There is some reason to believe that Melchizedek may have been none other than Shem, Noah's son. The chronology of *Genesis 11* reveals that Shem was still alive at this time. However many scholars dispute this connection.

6 *Genesis 14:20*

7 *Hebrews 11:8-18*

8 It has been suggested that it was here that Jacob had his vision of the ladder ascending to heaven. This is a very appropriate place for God to establish His link between heaven and earth, but Jacob called the place *Bethel – House of God*, which is situated some miles further north.

ways. If they had done so, God would have spared them and integrated them in some way with Abraham's descendants. But if not, their "cup of iniquity" would be regarded as full.[9] The God of the Hebrew Bible is often seen a a God of vengeance who shows no mercy. The four hundred years given to the Amorites, as well as the one hundred and twenty years given to Noah's generation demonstrate the injustice of this charge. But how long will He tolerate our generation's rebellion?

When the children of Abraham finally returned to Moriah under the leadership of Joshua, the region was still inhabited by the Amorites.[10]. They had not repented or turned away from their idolatrous religion, and Joshua was instructed to take the land by force. The Amorites were destroyed, but the encampment of Melchizedek had grown into a walled fortification and would remain impregnable for another five hundred years until David the king was to capture it and make it his capital. Perhaps remembering Melchizedek, David renamed the city *Jeru Salem,* the City of Peace[11].

The Rock itself was not included within the city wall, and lay about half a mile to the north. It fell on the property of a farmer named Ornan[12] who, knowing nothing of its honoured history, and caring even less about its glorious destiny, used it as a threshing ground to separate the chaff from the wheat of his harvest. But God had not forgotten the Rock.

5

It was almost exactly one thousand years since Abraham had stood with Isaac on this spot which Ornan and his four sons were now using to thresh wheat. But Ornan cared nothing about Abraham. His thoughts were on the plague that was sweeping through the land. They had been spared so far, for the plague had not yet reached Jerusalem. It would not be long though before Ornan and his family would become victims. Never had the people known disease and death to come so quickly. It was only three days since the plague had struck, but already the dead were being buried by the thousands. Ornan was not an Israelite, and did not worship their God. He was a Jebusite whose religion was influenced more by the idolatrous Canaan, son of Ham, than by the Hebrews. Nevertheless, Ornan knew what the Israelites were saying about the plague; they were saying that God was punishing them because David the king had sinned by conducting a census of the young men of Israel in order to conscript them into the army.[13] Ornan knew the census had taken place because men had been to his home and asked him how many men lived there. Whilst it seemed a reasonable thing to do from his perspective, he had been told that the Israelite God forbade this practice. Normally a census would be carried out by the priests, but due to the people's resistance, it had been carried out by the military. Now Ornan worried about how long it would be before he had to bury someone in his own family.

Threshing wheat was not pleasant work, for the separated chaff would always get in the eyes and in the throat. The breeze from the sea helped because it would blow the dust away from them if they stood upwind. But on this day there was no breeze, and the work was hard. The sun was at its height and the men were hot and thirsty.

Suddenly, without warning, a terrific blast of air in the form of a whirlwind descended fiercely upon the five men leaving them unable to stand. A bright light, far stronger than the sun, lit up the scene around them. The whirlwind effortlessly picked up the wheat on the Rock dispersing it in all directions leaving the Rock bare and swept clean. The whirlwind however, did not move on or die out. Rather it remained where it was on the Rock, spiraling up into the sky, the whole area bathed in glorious light.

The petrified men could not move; they sensed, rather than saw, the angel who was the cause of the brilliance. Had they been able to look at him they would have seen that he was far larger than a normal

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9 *Genesis 15:12-16.*

10 *Joshua 10*

11 The city was originally called *Uru Shalim*, and in fact David first named it after himself, *City of David*, but it began to be known as *Jerusalem* at this time.

12 Also known as Araunah

13 The story is found in *2 Samuel 24* and *1 Chronicles 21*

man, and was dressed in the garb of a warrior. He bore on his powerful countenance a look of divine indignation. He was not looking at the threshers, but was gazing fiercely in the direction of Jerusalem. In his right hand was a large sword which he pointed threateningly toward the city.

Terrified, for they feared that this was the plague coming for them, Ornan and his sons finally found their feet and ran from the fearsome sight and hid themselves behind some bushes a safe distance away. The angel remained where he was between heaven and earth, not hanging as though suspended, but in a stance that suggested his feet to be planted securely on the whirlwind. Thus he remained unmoving, facing the city, and holding his sword in his extended right hand. The terrified men remained cowering behind the bushes, afraid to move lest they be destroyed.

Inside Jerusalem there was as much fear. So many had died over the last three days in the surrounding countryside that everybody knew it was only a matter of time before they too were to die. The presence of the angel just half a mile north of the city had not gone unnoticed by the inhabitants. The brilliant light was clearly visible, and from that distance the figure of the warrior with drawn sword was quite discernible, the brilliance and glory surrounding him coming mainly from his face. What new omen was this? Certainly this was the angel of death coming to destroy them all. Pandemonium broke out as the inhabitants headed for the city gates in order to flee the terror to come. Many were crushed in the press of terrified humanity as they tried to get out of the city gates in their panic.

6

David the king was also inside the city. He was no longer a young man, having made this city his home for the past thirty years. As the years had passed he had seen his share of sorrow, and had made his share of mistakes. While he was fiercely devoted to the service of his God, his methods, like all long-term rulers, had become more dictatorial and unreasonable.

David the king knew exactly the cause of the plague, and he knew that he and he alone, was its cause. As he looked out over the city and saw the panic among his people, he knew that what he had done was a stench in God's sight. Yes, he *had* decided to increase his army, and *had* ordered his general, Joab, to conduct the census rather than the priests because he knew it would be a sensitive affair. It seemed innocent enough at the time; all military commanders did this. But David had forgotten that in Israel it was different; for as Joab pointed out, what right did David have to count God's men? They weren't to rely on numbers; they were to rely solely on God. Did God not want to receive the credit for Israel's victories? Yet if David's army was strong in numbers, it would appear that Israel's victories were due to his military strength. Thus Israel would become just another nation in the land. David should have known better than this. Three hundred men were enough for Gideon to defeat an army of Midianites, so why count the men? And why increase the army? Now as he looked at the fearsome angel, it seemed to him that the sword was pointing directly at him.

God had reacted swiftly to David's lack of faith. He sent a seer to him with a message, *I offer you three things; choose one of them and I will do it to you. Either three years of famine, three months of defeat by your enemies, or three days of plague, the angel of the Lord bringing death throughout the land.* "Now", said the prophet, "Decide for yourself what answer I shall take back to Him that sent me".

What a choice for a man to make, to allow his people to die of starvation, to suffer military defeat with the subsequent looting of homes, raping of the womenfolk and killing of babies, or to allow the population of Israel to be decimated by disease. Either way the innocent must suffer for the foolishness of one man. David was devastated. "I am in deep distress" he lamented. "Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for he is merciful, but do not let me fall into the hands of men".

God heard David's distress, but even with repentance, the fruits of sin must be swallowed. The angel came to, of all places, the Rock; and drew the sword of death over Jerusalem. Throughout the land of Israel 70,000 men died from the plague.

When David saw the angel and the sword of condemnation, he fell on his face on the ground and prayed to God, “Lord, is it not I who ordered the people to be numbered? I am the one who sinned, what have these sheep done? Let your plague fall upon me and my house, but not on these your people”. God heard the plea of David, and, because He is a God *whose mercy endures forever*[14], had compassion upon His people, and commanded the angel to put his sword back in its sheath. Then as suddenly as they had come, the angel and the whirlwind were gone and the afternoon stillness returned to the Rock.

7

When the angel departed and the wind calmed, Ornan and his sons remained behind the bushes for several minutes before plucking up the courage to come out. Cautiously they peered out like timid mice to see if it was safe; then slowly emerged still fearful of the angel’s return.

As he emerged, Ornan noticed a party of men coming toward him. He told his sons to go home, but he, curious, decided to remain to see who it was. As the party approached, Ornan saw that it was none other than King David. Gad, the seer, had returned to David upon God’s instruction, and had told him to go to Ornan’s threshing floor and offer a sacrifice there. As David and his entourage arrived, Ornan bowed before him in humility in the customary fashion of kneeling with hands and forehead to the ground. David bade him rise, and said, “I wish to buy this threshing floor from you in order to build an altar that the plague may be stopped”.

Ornan, being a Canaanite[15], was filled with superstitious fears, and was only too glad to be rid of this troublesome rock. “Take it”, he said. “Do as you please with it, and take my oxen and wood for the offering”.

But David would not take as a gift that which was to be offered to God. “Can I offer to the Lord that which cost me nothing?” he asked, and instructed his treasurer to pay for the Rock with gold. Thus the Rock became the possession of David, king of Israel, the man after God’s own heart[16]. He built an altar on it, and perhaps for the first time in years, the blood of a lamb was shed on that hallowed spot.

In the days that followed, David thought much about this incident. Another blot on his record, another sin for the people to criticise him for. But David had previously tasted God’s mercy, and there, at the Rock, he again experienced the joy of salvation[17]. As the flames devoured the sacrifice, and as he knelt in humility before the altar, he again felt the peace that comes when God removes sin and its guilt. It seemed to David that this spot was special. He knew this hill was the Mount Moriah that Abraham had been sent to, and he knew that it was here that God had interceded on behalf of Isaac. But it was at this Rock that he too had interceded on behalf of Jerusalem. Was this Rock perhaps the spot chosen by God as his point of intercession for guilty man? Was not this to be God’s Holy Place on earth? Was it not this holy Zion that God was choosing for his habitation on earth? [18]. Thus the idea grew in the mind of David that at this spot, at this Rock, he would put into effect the dream he had cherished all these years, to build a temple to his God. Not just a tent like the one currently at Gibeon, but a dwelling fit for God Himself[19]. Here would stand a building that would house the sacred Ark forever. Here he would build a mighty temple, a structure that would be the most glorious in all the world; one that people the world over would visit to admire, and more importantly to worship God. If the surrounding idolatrous nations had temples to their myriads of pathetic gods, then the Lord should have a temple that surpassed all of them. This was to be the dwelling place of God Himself. In fact David had even been collecting, over the years,

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14 *Psalm 136:26*

15 *1 Kings 9:20,21*

16 *Acts 13:22*

17 *Psalm 51:12*

18 *Psalm 76:2, 132:13. Moriah* also means *Chosen by God.*

19 *1 Chronicles 29:1*

materials of the finest quality to be used in its construction[20]. Yet God told him that he was not the one to build the temple. His hands had shed too much blood to build a dwelling place for God. Yes, the temple should be built there, but the honour of building it would go not to David, but to his son Solomon.

8

It was during the fourth year of Solomon's reign that he broke ground for the Temple. Mt. Moriah was far from level, and much labour was needed to prepare this rocky terrain. Solomon wished to leave the Rock as it was, for on this spot would stand the Altar of Burnt Offering. This meant that the higher land surrounding the Rock would need to be removed and used to fill those parts that were lower, thus providing a level platform for the temple. The platform would be far larger than the temple itself, for it was to include courts, priestly residences, storage space and all sorts of other buildings required to support the function and operation of a temple and its priesthood. But as if this was not enough, he also planned for his new palace to be situated adjacent to the Temple compound, the construction of which was finally to be far more costly, and take far longer, than the Temple itself.

As all civil engineers are aware, to prepare a hilltop region to accommodate the kind of population Solomon envisaged requires major planning. Provision of water and waste disposal are among the first considerations to be made. Then there is security and site access to be taken into account. Thus Solomon and his engineers designed deep cisterns to catch rain water, and a network of channels that would run waste, sewage, and sacrificial remains off into the surrounding valleys. This would more than double the entire city area. Gates would be designed at strategic places around the city. The original northern wall of the City of David would be assimilated into the southern wall of this enormous site.

As work on the foundation started, Solomon employed the most skilled craftsmen in the land to work on the furnishings, the timber work, the curtains, the gold work and all the fittings that would be required in this most lavish of all buildings. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Solomon and for his builders was that none of the iron and masonry work was to be done at the temple site. During the entire construction process there was not to be heard the slightest sound of hammer or chisel. Every stone was to be designed and fashioned at the quarry, and then brought to the Temple ready to put in place. Verbal instructions were to be issued, where possible, away from the site, and no casual or irreverent talk was to be tolerated. The building of God's house was to be done in silence out of respect for its intended Resident.

Because only the best materials were to be used in the construction, and because the best were not to be found in Israel, Solomon turned to other lands for the provision of these things. For his timber, he turned to the forests of Lebanon; for gold, bronze and iron work, he sought Phoenician artisans from the coastal region of Tyre.

9

It took seven years to complete the temple and its surrounding structures. When it was finished, Jerusalem was suddenly transformed into one of the most magnificent cities in the world. The new Temple with its rows of marbled colonnades decorated with palm trees, its terraces supporting residences and offices, its vast open courts, all glistening white in the Mediterranean sun, took away the breath of those who saw it for the first time. The crowning glory of the whole was the Temple itself. It was situated at the centre of the entire complex, and was approached through a series of courts, each of which was on a higher level than the one before it. The outer court, to be known as the Great Court, and accessible to all people, was at the lowest level, and bordered by colonnades on three sides. At each corner of the court were towers protruding above the city wall, and forming a part of the wall. There was only one entrance into the Temple proper, and that was by ascending a series of steps from the Great Court into the Court of the Priests. Into this court, also surrounded by colonnades, only Israelites were permitted. From the Court of the Priests another series of steps led up to the Upper Court. It was into this court that the Israelites were to bring their animals for sacrifice. In this much smaller court there was

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20 *1 Chronicles 22*

a ramp leading up to the Altar of Burnt Offering. This Altar, upon which the priest would offer the sacrifices brought to him, would, when brought from Gibeon, six miles away, stand upon a bronze framework.

From the Upper Court another series of steps led into the Temple itself. The temple would be built so that the Most Holy Place, containing the Ark of the Covenant, would be toward the western aspect of the site, and the entrance, flanked by two mighty pillars, would face the east in alignment with the summit of the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley. That way, the early morning sun would shine directly into the temple illuminating its magnificent golden features and interior fittings. The Temple was ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and stood forty-five feet high. Either side of the entrance stood massive free-standing bronze pillars with ornately carved capitals. The name of the pillar to the south of the entrance was *Boaz*, and that to the north was *Jachin*[21]*.* To enter this building was the privilege of the priests alone. In it were only two rooms, the first being the Holy Place in which were to be placed the Table of Shewbread, the Altar of Incense and the solid gold *Menorah,* the seven-branched lampstand. To these original articles Solomon added another nine lampstands to provide light to the room. The Holy Place was lined with cedar wood intricately carved with *cherubim*, palm trees and flowers. Then the woodwork was overlaid with beaten gold. The light from the ten lamps was reflected from wall to wall and ceiling adding a further grandeur to the sense of awe and beauty already there.

The second room was beyond the first, and separated from it by rich blue drapes tapestried in gold. This second room was the Holy of Holies. Entirely cubic in dimension, it was also approached by a series of stairs, for it was higher than the first room, as though each step closer to the throne of God were a step closer to heaven itself. This room, however, was entered but once each year, on the Day of Atonement. For it was this room that was to contain the sacred Ark of the Covenant made so meticulously in the desert in the days of Moses, and which contained that sacred treasure, the two Tables of Stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments.

10

Finally the work was finished. King Solomon had built the most magnificent structure in the known world. When all was done, he had the articles of furniture brought from Gibeon, where they had been placed in earlier days. These were the very articles crafted by the most skilled artisans in the nation of Israel during the days of Moses. They were made according to the exact specifications given by God Himself, and were placed inside the Holy Place of the new Temple. With them came the great Altar of Burnt Offering which was placed on the platform prepared for it.

All that was missing now was the sacred Ark of the Covenant. That was still in the old part of the city where it had been since David brought it there years before. Now that its new and permanent home was ready, Solomon planned what was perhaps to be the greatest occasion Israel had ever witnessed: the Ark's transfer to the Most Holy Place. He would bring it to its new home in a ceremony like none other before, and then he would dedicate the Temple and offer it to the God of Heaven as His dwelling place.

Solomon chose the Feast of Tabernacles as the day he would dedicate the Temple. This was the day on which Israel normally celebrated the end of the harvest and God's presence among His people. Of all the festivals this was the most joyful, for this was the one that followed the awesome Day of Atonement in which God dealt with the sins of His people. But now, their sins laid on the head of the scapegoat, and removed permanently out into the desert,[22] God symbolically came to be with His purified people just as He will when sin on earth is finally eradicated[23]. This therefore, was a joyful time for Israel with much singing and dancing, and sanctified festivity.

On the feast of Tabernacles people would normally come from all over Israel to Jerusalem to celebrate. On this day however, the new Temple would be dedicated, and all Israel gathered at Moriah. Foreign dignitaries and ambassadors assembled in the various courts amid a splendour that surpassed all that

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21 See *1 Kings 7* for a description of the Temple ornamentation and furnishings.

22 *Leviticus 16*

23 While the final judgment of the earth depicted in *Matthew 25*, and other texts, is the antitypical Day of Atonement, so the second coming of Christ is the antitype of the Feast of Tabernacles.

had ever been seen before. Solomon in all his wealth and wisdom spared nothing in making this the most glorious occasion Israel had ever seen; the day when God's earthly dwelling place should be presented to Him. Now the people waited in eager anticipation for the arrival of the sacred Ark.

11

The journey of the Ark was not a long one, not more than a few hundred yards. Yet it was slow, for, following the practice of his father David, King Solomon had instructed the priestly bearers to stop and offer a sacrifice every six paces.[24] Thus the procession took several hours before it arrived, led by the Ark itself which was carried by Levites and followed by a train of 120 priests along with all the leaders of Israel, at the threshold of the Temple. As the Ark was borne slowly on its way, the people sang songs of praise and deliverance; children sang and laughed as they happily ran beside and behind the ark amid the excitement of the day. Foreign dignitaries looked on in wonder at this small but glorious nation as it worshipped its God.

As the Ark was taken by the Levites up the final set of stairs into the sacred room, the Most Holy Place, a black cloud filled the entire Temple so that the priests could perform no function inside it. An awed hush fell upon the people. Then as the people watched and waited in absorbed expectation, King Solomon ascended the ramp that led to the Altar of Sacrifice, upon which the carcass of a lamb had been placed for a burnt offering. Then standing in front of the Altar on the platform directly above the Rock, he turned and faced the people. Then he knelt before them, raised his eyes and hands to heaven, and dedicated the Temple to God. His voice rang through the courtyards and porticos of the Temple complex:

O Lord, God of Israel,
There is no God like You, in heaven or earth -
You who keep Your covenant of love
With Your servants who continue in Your way.
You have kept Your promise
To Your servant David, my father,
With Your mouth You have promised,
With Your hand You have fulfilled…

Now arise, O Lord God,
And come to Your resting place;
You and the Ark of Your might.
May Your priests, O Lord God
Be clothed with Salvation;
May Your saints rejoice in Your goodness.
O Lord God, do not reject Your anointed one;
Remember the great love
Promised to Your servant David.[25]

As Solomon finished his prayer a deep sense of God's presence came upon all those present. Suddenly a mighty roar of thunder shook Moriah, and a bolt of lightning came from the heavens and consumed the burned offering that had been placed on the Altar. Then the assembly fell on their knees with their foreheads to the ground and worshipped, for they knew that God had come into His house.

12

Under the rule of King Solomon, Jerusalem, with its glorious Temple became one of the wonders of the world. As word of Solomon's wisdom and glory reached the ears of those in far away places, visitors came from the ends of the earth to see for themselves. This was as God planned it, for it was His divine

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24 According to *1 Kings 8:63*, Solomon offered 142,000 sacrifices during the dedication process.

25 *1 Kings 8:22-54.*

intention that through the glory of Israel, a knowledge of its religion would spread far and wide so that all nations might come to honour and worship the God of heaven.

But it was not to last. So often has sinful man frustrated the plans of his caring Creator. Israel forgot her heritage and her God; and even Solomon, who spent seven years painstakingly constructing the Temple to God's glory, spent a further thirteen years building his palace to his own glory. To this palace, which lay adjacent to the Temple, he added, contrary to the command of God[26], a series of stables capable of housing up to twelve thousand horses[27], as well as residences for his 700 wives and 300 concubines. So great was the magnificence of Solomon's architecture and wealth that it became he, and not his God, that people came to witness. As they did so, Israel, little by little, turned from its heritage and lost sight of the God whom it had promised to serve. The people began to imitate the pagan nations about them, adopting their religion and culture. And so a nation so full of promise, turned from its God, and descended into heathenism.

Thus the history of Israel from this time onwards became one of failure and tragedy. After the death of Solomon, the nation split into two, both of which departed from the plan that God had intended. Finally, after 400 years of sending prophets to warn them of their condition, God, in fulfillment of his dire warnings through Moses,[28] allowed a pagan king to overthrow Jerusalem, and the surrounding nations, notably the descendants of Esau, to enter the city and destroy everything in it, including the Temple.

So it was that in 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and took captive those he did not put to death as slaves to Babylon. With him he took the sacred objects from the Temple that were used in the worship of God.[29]

For the next seventy years Jerusalem lay abandoned and desolate. Only a few shepherds and farmers dwelt in the region grazing their flocks or otherwise doing their best to eke out a living. The walls of Jerusalem were but rubble, the buildings within it destroyed, and the once glorious Temple no more than burned out ruins. No trace remains of Solomon's palace, and his magnificent stables are but history.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,
Yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
We hanged our harps upon the willows
In the midst thereof.
For there they that carried us away captive
Required of us a song;
And they that wasted us required of us mirth,
Saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
But how could we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land?[30]

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26 Deuteronomy 17:16 forbade a king to multiply horses and return to Egypt to buy them.

27 The exact number of stables and horses is uncertain because different texts give conflicting numbers. While *1 Kings 4:26* may refer specifically to those in Jerusalem, *2 Chronicles 9:28* may refer to those in the entire nation.

28 *Deuteronomy 28* describes God's plans for Israel and what would be the result of their success or failure in following His plan.

29 No mention is made of what happened to the Ark of the Covenant. Many believe Jeremiah hid it in a cave somewhere in Israel where it still rests today. An Ethiopian tradition is that it was stolen by Azarius, son of Zadok the priest, when he accompanied Prince Menelik, the offspring of a union between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, back to Ethiopia, and was taken to Axim, where also many believe it still is up to this day (for example see Hancock, G. The Sign and The Seal*, , Mandarin Books 1993*).

30 *Psalm 137:1-3*

The road from Bethany to Jerusalem was unusually busy as a large excited crowd made its way slowly toward the holy city. It was afternoon, but the sun was beginning to lose its strength on this first day of the week. At the head of the noisy, but happy, procession was none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the teacher who had caused such a stir in Israel over the past three years. As they moved slowly along the two-mile road from Bethany to Jerusalem, word spread ahead of them that the teacher was coming. Rumours buzzed that He was coming to set himself up as King. If this was true it would mean that at last the despised Romans would soon be overthrown and Israel would be free. The crown grew as more and more people were attracted by the sounds of jubilation and triumph.

When they reached the summit of the Mount of Olives the procession stopped as two of Jesus' disciples came up the hill from Jerusalem to meet them. They were leading a donkey. When the two men reached the Master they removed their cloaks and placed them on the donkey's back. Then the Master took His place on them, and riding the donkey, He led the way down into the Kidron Valley which lies between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem. The symbolism was understood by all, for it is written:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem.
See your King comes to you,
Righteous and having salvation,
Gentle, and riding on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey[31].

The crowd danced around Him waving palm branches in the air and strewing them on the ground before their King. Voices were raised in praise and song as the people cried out,

Hosanna to the Son of David.
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.[32]

Suddenly Jesus halted; the procession stopped with him and waited in eager anticipation. But the King made no move; He was surveying the magnificent scene before Him. For across the valley the holy city spread out before Him, a panorama of white, shimmering with a golden hue in the sun that was dropping toward the horizon before them. The people saw and understood His gaze and looked proudly upon their city, their Jerusalem. Dominating the scene directly before them was the crown jewel of Jerusalem, the Temple complex. It was this magnificent structure with its towers, courts, colonnades and golden domes siluetted by the late afternoon sun behind it, which instilled so much pride in the people as they joined their King in admiring it.

Yet they did not understand. Beautiful though it was, it was not Jerusalem's beauty that had caused the King to halt. As He sat upon the donkey gazing upon His beloved city, the people could not know that what Jesus was looking at was not Jerusalem's beauty, but its destiny. For their King had come to them, humble, riding on a donkey, not to throw out the Romans, but to deal with a problem of far greater import, the problem of sin. For now the One had come who would crush the head of the serpent[33]; now the heel of the One to whom all the sacrifices pointed was about to be bruised. For this very week, the hatred of the authorities toward Him would lead them to have him executed as a criminal. The King knew that, but these people, like sheep without a shepherd, did not understand it. Within a week these very people who were praising so spontaneously, would be crying out, "We have no king but Caesar."

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
You who kill the prophets,
And stone those who are sent to you,
How often would I have gathered your children together,
Even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings,

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31 *Zechariah 9:9*

32 *Matthew 21:9*

33 *Genesis 3:15*

But you would not.[34]

As He looked across at the Temple Mount, Jesus was seeing God's great plan of salvation being acted out on that sacred spot on behalf of an ungrateful people who seemed incapable of comprehending spiritual things. He was seeing the history of Jerusalem unfold before Him, and seeing Nebuchadnezzar stand where *He* now stood contemplating its destruction, and He knew that in a few short years another general would be doing exactly the same.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. What great things God had intended for this city. It was to have been more than just a great city; it was to have been the most important city in the world. It was here that God had intended to dwell amongst his people as their God, and they as His people. Travellers would have come from all over the world to learn truth and wisdom. The worship of the Creator would have spread far and wide, and the Gospel of the Kingdom would have been spread throughout civilisation. People the world over would have known and understood the prophecies concerning the Messiah; and when the time had come for all righteousness to be fulfilled, the Sacrifice would have been made, in some way, by God Himself, or by a latter day Abraham, there at the Rock[35]. But then a holy people would have understood, and believed.

But it was not to be. After Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem, it lay desolate for over seventy years before Zerubbabel, the new governor of the returned exiles, succeeded in rebuilding it. By that time the golden glory of Babylon had succumbed to the might of the Persian king Cyrus. While Solomon had built the first Temple at a time of peace and security, with the assistance of the surrounding peoples, Zerubbabel's temple was built amid sustained opposition from a generation who did not remember Israel. For Israel was a nation no more; ten of the twelve sons of Jacob, long before the time of Nebuchadnezzar, had been forever disbursed among the nations of the world, never to be heard of again. Now the descendants of the remaining two sons, Judah and Benjamin, were the ones who came back from Babylon to try and rebuild their nation. They were to succeed, but not without bloodshed and tears, and when the Temple was finished those who had lived before the captivity wept as they remembered its former glory.

But for the next four hundred years they were to be dominated by one empire after another. After the Persians, in 331 BC, came Alexander the Great, the fearless young Macedonian empire builder, who reached as far east as India. But with his untimely death in 323 BC, the empire broke up into a confusion of smaller kingdoms, two of which, the Seleucids to the north of Palestine, and the Ptolemies to the South, vied with one another for this beautiful and fertile region that lay between them, leaving the remnant of Israel as a woman courted by two self-seeking lovers.

Finally, in 168 BC, the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes, in his insatiable desire to Hellenize Israel, committed an act that was to turn the tide of their history. In that year, after a humiliating defeat in Egypt by the rising Roman power, he marched into Jerusalem, plundered the Temple, stopped the evening and morning sacrifices, and in a final humiliation, stood on that sacred spot, where once Abraham had stood, and offered, on the Altar of Sacrifice, as a burnt offering, a pig. He then ordered the Jews to stop worshipping their Creator and to worship instead Zeus; he ordered a stop to circumcision, he enforced the eating and sacrifice of swine, enforced labour on the Sabbath Day, and destroyed the *Torah*.

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[34] *Matthew 23:37*. Jesus did not utter these famous words at this time, though He may well have thought them. He spoke them later that week in the Temple while in dispute with the teachers of the law, and followed them with the words, "Look, your house is left to you desolate, for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'" (v38).

[35] This touches upon a profound subject. It was God's intention that the Messiah would have been received with welcome and understanding by the world. Yet He still had to die as the Lamb which took away the sins of the world. How this would have happened can only be conjecture. Had it happened this way, this planet would have been spared much of the turmoil we have had to endure over the last two thousand years.

This was too much for the Remnant of Israel, and under the leadership of Mattathias and his son, Judas Maccabeus, they raised an army that was to overthrow the hated Seleucids, and, three years later in 165 BC, restore the worship of God in a rededicated Temple.[36]

After that, Israel maintained an independence until 63 BC when the Roman general Pompey took it under his control, and Israel fell under the iron control of Rome. Then, in 37 BC the Edomite, Herod the Great, finally secured for himself control of all Israel including Jerusalem and the Temple. It was during the last years of Herod's reign that word reached him of a baby born in Bethlehem, who, it was said, was the Messiah. In an act of brutality that has scarcely been equaled in history, Herod slaughtered all the infants in that town to try and rid himself of the One he thought might be a rival to himself.

But the Child was not among the dead, and now He sat upon a donkey looking over the Kidron Valley at the city He loved, the city that had rejected His warnings and stoned the prophets He had sent them. Now, this Passover week, they would put Him to death, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and they would persecute those few who had dared believe in Him. A sadness swept over Him so deep that He wailed in anguish. Burying His head in his hands, great sobs burst from him and He wept in uncontrolled grief, his body rocking back and forth on the donkey.

> *Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD has afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.*[37]

The people looked on amazed at this imponderable sight. Some wept in sympathy without knowing why. Yet His grief was not for Himself, but for the people. What more could God have done to save them, but they would not believe? Looking up again at the objects of His love surrounding Him, He said to them, *If only you had only known this day what things would have brought you peace, but now they are hidden from you. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognise it when your God came to you.*[38]

Once again the procession, momentarily subdued by the unexpected emotional display from Jesus, started its way down the hill and along the short trail that led to the City's Shushan Gate which opened directly into the Temple area[39]. Again the now very large crowd began to sing and praise God, waving palm fronds, spreading their garments on the path before Him, welcoming their King into His city.

For all his evil, Herod had not been called "The Great" for nothing. He had successfully maintained a balance of allegiance in these difficult times, and had protected Israel from the worst of Rome's iron fist, as he had managed to preserve Israel's unique culture. He had also embarked upon a great plan to modernize Jerusalem and repair Zerubbabel's Temple which was now nearly half a millennium old. Even though Herod was now dead, his program of restoration was still under way when Jesus led the way toward the Temple that Palm Sunday.

As the jubilant crowd approached the gate, all those who had been inside the Temple precincts came out to see the source of the unusual disturbance just outside the wall. The crowd swelled and the clamour increased as understanding of what was happening spread to the newcomers. Among those who came out were the religious leaders and others who officiated in the Temple, as well as some Roman soldiers.

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36 This event is celebrated annually by the Jews as the Festival of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights.

37 *Lamentations 1:12*

38 *Luke 19:41-44*

39 The Gospels do not say which gate Jesus used to enter Jerusalem. The Shushan gate is the closest for someone going directly to the Temple. Today the Gate still exists. Known as the Gate Miphkad, or Golden Gate, it is a bricked up double arch on the eastern wall of the Moslem *Haram esh-Sherîf*, which enclosures the Dome of the Rock.

The dignitaries looked on aghast that such a rabble should be coming directly to the Temple. With the help of the soldiers they pushed their way through the crowd until they found themselves face to face with Jesus seated on the donkey and grinning in exuberance at the wonder of the scene. Instantly they understood that this was His doing, and in their indignation tried in vain to silence the crowd. On failing to exert the slightest influence over the crowd, one of them turned to Jesus and shouted above the clamour, “Teacher, tell your followers to stop this noise”.

I tell you, Jesus yelled at them above the noise, *If they should be quiet, then the stones will cry out in their place*[40].

They were now just outside the city gate, and while the Pharisees tried to control and disburse the crowd, Jesus quietly slipped off the donkey and in an evasion technique He seemed to have mastered from the many times He had been surrounded by crowds, He made His way unnoticed into the Temple’s Outer Court. He was alone.

Again He stopped and surveyed the scene. This time it was not the Temple’s beauty or its destiny that caused him to stop; it was the offensive scene before Him that brought Him up. For the Outer Court of the Temple had been turned into a market place. Animals for sacrifice were tied up waiting to be bought and sold. Tables of moneychangers lined the colonnades where money would change hands as the people haggled over exorbitant prices. Stalls and cages were filled with frightened animals, the stench from their waste permeating the Court. This was the preparation for the Passover, but from this scene it was evident to the Teacher that its true significance would be entirely lost. For here stood the One to whom the Passover pointed, yet amid this degraded spectacle, how could they ever know it? It was late in the day now, but in the morning He knew He would do what had to be done.

In the few minutes of comparative solitude the Teacher was given by the crowd, He made His way through the various courts until He came to the Court of the Priests in which stood the Altar of Sacrifice. Normally, no Jew could enter this Court unless he was bringing a sacrifice to the Altar. But Jesus, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, made his way boldly to the altar and stood silently before it.

As the Son of man communed silently with His Father before the altar, His hands raised up toward heaven, the crowd outside was in confusion. Their King was nowhere to be seen, and it appeared that their hopes would come to nothing. Gradually, disappointed people began filtering back into the Temple while others disbursed in different directions under the instructions of the Pharisees and soldiers, until only the Teacher’s most loyal followers were left to look for their Master.

When they found Him, He was unobtrusively making His way back to the double-arched Shushan gate through which He had first entered the Outer Court. Joining his followers He turned again to take a final glance at the Temple before leaving. Noticing this gesture, one of the disciples, thinking that Jesus was simply admiring the architecture, commented on the majesty of the building and the enormous size of the stones which had been individually sculptured before being put in place. But their Teacher’s reply was enigmatic, *I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.*[41]

After they had left the Temple precinct the now much smaller group made its way back to the Mount of Olives. When they reached its summit they again stopped and surveyed the majestic scene. The disciples, filled with a nationalistic pride in their magnificent Temple, could not resist asking their teacher what He meant when He said that not one stone would be left upon another. Sitting down, the sun now dropping close to the top of the city skyline, the Teacher bade His followers do likewise. When they were seated He began to unfold to them the events that were to take place in Israel during their own lifetimes. *Take heed that no man deceive you.* He told them, *for many shall come in my name, saying, “I am the Christ”; and many shall be deceived. You shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, but don’t be alarmed, for all these things must come to pass; but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and*

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40 In fulfillment of *Habakkuk 2:11*.

41 *Matthew 24:2*

kingdom against kingdom. There shall be famines, epidemics and earthquakes in many places, but these are just the beginning of sorrows. Then they shall persecute you and kill you, and you shall be hated by all nations for my name's sake…

Many false prophets shall rise who will deceive many, and because sin shall abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who remains faithful to the end shall be saved, and this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached throughout the whole world as a witness to all nations. Then the end shall come.

So, when you see the desecration of the Holy Place of the Temple[42]spoken of by the prophet Daniel, let those in Judaea flee into the mountains; let those on the housetop not come down to pick up anything from the house, nor should those working in the field return home to collect their clothes. Woe to them that are pregnant or nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight will not be in winter, nor on the Sabbath day. For when this happens it shall be followed by a great tribulation, the like of which has never been experienced since the beginning of the world; nor will it ever be again. Unless those days be shortened, no-one will survive; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

Then if anyone tells you Christ is here or there, don't believe it. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets who will perform amazing signs such that if it were possible, they would deceive the very elect. Look, I say it again, if they tell you I am in the desert, don't go there; if they say I am in someone's private home, don't believe it. For as the lightning lights up the entire sky, so shall be the coming of the Son of man…

Then immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall be darkened, and the moon will fail to give its light. Stars will fall from heaven, and the heavenly bodies shall be shaken. Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and all the peoples of the earth shall cry out as they see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He shall send out his angels to the sound of a loud trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Now learn a lesson from the fig tree: when you see the leaves appearing you know that summer is near. So likewise, when you see all these things happening, know that all this is near, even at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation shall not have passed away before all these things happen. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. Of that day and hour no man knows, not even the angels of heaven; only my Father. But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days before the flood they carried on eating, drinking and marrying right up until the day Noah entered the ark. They were caught unawares when the flood came and took them all away; so shall it be when the Son of man returns. Then there shall be two working in the field; one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding grain at the mill, and one shall be taken, and the other left.

Watch therefore; for you do not know what hour your Lord will come. But know this, that if the owner of the house had known when the thief would come, he would have watched, and would have prevented his house being broken into. Therefore you must also be ready, for just when you don't expect Him is when the Son of man will come.[43]

Thus the Teacher unveiled to His students a glimpse of what lay in store for them in the years to come. Yet He was also instructing those who would come after them in the generations to come so that in all times and in all places, His disciples would know the signs that would foretell His return as King of kings and Lord of lords.

17

On the sixth day of that week, the authorities arrested Jesus, and, after the mockery of a trial, had Him put to death on a skull-shaped hill. According to the sign attached to the cross to which He was nailed His crime was that He was King of the Jews. The accusation was sustained by the presence of a crown, shaped from the branch of a thorn bush, and forced harshly down on his head creating rivulets of blood that matted His hair and ran into His eyes and down His face.

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[42] Jesus refers to this as *The Abomination of Desolation"* See also *Daniel 8:13, 11:31, 12:11.*

[43] *Matthew 24:4-44*

Only a handful grasped the significance of what was happening that day, and even fewer understood the meaning of this King's dying cry, *It is finished*. Most who heard it thought He was referring to His life; they had forgotten that at that very moment the officiating priest was standing in front of the Altar of Sacrifice upon which the Passover lamb quietly lay. As Abraham had done all those years before on the same spot, the priest was raising the knife toward heaven and presenting his offering to God.

Not far away, on the skull-shaped hill, the King uttered His last words, *Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.* Then He bowed His head and died.

At that moment the ground began to heave as an earthquake tore through the land of Israel. The officiating priest, now about to place the knife at the throat of the submissive animal, dropped the knife in surprise and terror. From within the Temple came a sound that had no explanation in the ears of the priest even if he did hear it. The curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies had ripped apart from top to bottom, and was now joined only by a narrow bridge at its base. There, exposed to all who would see, was the chamber that had once housed the sacred Ark of the Covenant[44]. The Lord had provided Himself an Offering, and the way into the holiest was laid open once and for all,[45]

When Christ had cried out on the cross, *It is finished,* it was not His earthly life He referred to. Mount Moriah and the skull-shaped hill were focal points, not just in the history of Israel, but for the destiny of all heaven and earth. For since a created being had challenged God,[46] the entire universe had looked on with vital interest as events unfolded on planet Earth. All heaven held its breath as the sword of Herod sought the life of the holy infant. Unfallen beings watched in wonder as the young carpenter went out into the desert to contend with the forces of evil. Angels beheld in amazement the powers of darkness enclose about their suffering Leader at Gethsemane. In a second they would have come to His aid had they been bidden.

Had God simply destroyed the Enemy when he rebelled, the question would ever have been in the minds of created beings as to the veracity of his accusations. Hence God, in His wisdom, allowed sin to follow its course so that men and angels might see for themselves that God is Love. When heaven saw its beloved Leader dying on the cross amid such unbridled hatred, it then knew that the Enemy's charges were false and that God was indeed just and true. They knew then that sin would never rise a second time.[47]

18

Events transpired just as the Teacher had said they would that evening on the Mount of Olives. Many of those listening to Him that day were witness to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Roman General Titus in A.D. 70. It is estimated that up to one million people lost their lives in that catastrophe. Israel never fully recovered from that event, and it was not for another sixty years that Jerusalem was rebuilt. This time it was the Roman Emperor, Hadrian who built it, but as a Gentile city under the name of *Aelia* into which Jews were forbidden to enter.

Between A.D. 638 and 1077 Jerusalem was controlled by the Arabs, and during this time a new religion was given to the world. Mount Moriah was to become one of Islam's most sacred sites for it was the traditional site of the Prophet Mohammed's ascension to heaven. This site which had once been Solomon's Temple became the site of the *Haram esh-Sherîf*, the enclosure that was to include the Dome of the Rock.

In 1077 the Turks overthrew Jerusalem and persecuted the Christians living there with such ferocity that Europe responded by instigating the Crusades. By 1099, at the cost of uncountable human lives, Jerusalem had become a Christian city, and it remained that way for 88 years until it was lost to Egypt. Thereafter Jerusalem experienced domination by a number of nations at different times until, in 1517, it became a part of the Ottoman Empire under whose control it remained for 400 years.

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44 The room was empty, and the whereabouts of the Ark of the Covenant was unknown.

45 See Hebrews Chapter 9.

46 See *Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-15*

47 *Nahum 1:9*

When Jerusalem surrendered to General Allenby in 1917, Palestine became a part of the British Empire. But not for long; the rise of the Nazi party in Europe resulted in many Jews electing to return to Arab dominated Palestine. By 1948 such large numbers of Jews had returned to Palestine, and tensions had become so great that hostilities broke out in the Jewish-Arab war of that year, which resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel. Between 1948 and 1967 Jerusalem remained a divided city with Israel controlling the western sector, and Jordan controlling the eastern and original part of the city. In the six-day war of 1967 Israel occupied this and other Arab sectors of Palestine which they hold amid acute tension to this day.

Today the skyline of Jerusalem is dominated by the Dome of the Rock on Mount Moriah. Beneath this magnificent golden dome the Rock remains unchanged. It now has a hole drilled through it which may have been there since Solomon's time in order to wash away sacrificial blood and remains. The site of the skull-shaped hill cannot be identified.

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Death was unable to hold the author of life in its grip. On the third day after His crucifixion the stone in front of Jesus' tomb was rolled away, and, at the command of God, its Occupant came forth in the newness of life. Today He intercedes for us as our High Priest in the heavenly Sanctuary. He will remain there as our advocate[48] until the day He replaces His priestly garments with those of a King. Then, in fulfilment of His promise of that evening on the Mount of Olives, He shall return in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and every eye shall see Him.[49] As to when that will occur, perhaps it would be well to heed His lesson from the fig tree.

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48 *1 John 2:1*

49 *Revelation 1:7*